

Jerusalem artichoke soup with prawns & *piment d'Espelette*



We had something like this at Mon Vieil Ami, an excellent bistro in Paris, during the first week of our culinary travels. Jerusalem artichoke has to be one of my favourite soups; it's just so delicious. This combination with sweet shellfish, fresh herbs and slightly hot, bright chilli is a winner. In the bistro they performed some table theatre for us by pouring the soup over the garnishes artfully placed in the bowl. You could just put the garnishes on top, as usual; the prawns will just about stay on the surface without sinking.

Piment d'Espelette is a red chilli grown in a small area in southern France, traditionally northern Basque Country. The dried flakes have a small amount of heat and almost smoky flavour with some acidity. You could substitute a mix of hot and sweet paprika, perhaps with a dash of smoky Spanish 'pimentón' if you have it. Piment d'Espelette has its own AOC status and was all the rage in Parisian bistros when we were eating our way round them in February 2008.

For a much simpler Jerusalem artichoke soup, simply omit all the garnishes – it's still fabulous. Or see the variation at the bottom which is from my Chez Panisse intern days – a perfect marriage of celery and 'sunchoke', as they call it there. This soup also featured on our road trip: the owner of Lalla Mira organic restaurant and hotel in Essaouira agreed for her chef to teach me the Moroccan speciality 'pastilla' on condition that I reciprocated by teaching her some new dishes. I found some lovely Jerusalem artichokes in the souk and this soup was a big success.

Serves: 4 as a starter or 2 as a meal in itself

Total time: 45 mins

1 small onion, finely sliced

olive oil

salt

500g Jerusalem artichokes, peeled and evenly sliced

bouquet garni of one small sprig of thyme, a parsley stalk and a bay leaf

nutmeg

garnishes:

2-3 large raw prawns per person, peeled (you can leave the tails on but it will be harder to eat)

salt & pepper

nutmeg

olive oil

piment d'Espelette (or sweet paprika spiked with a little hot paprika)

finely chopped chives
snipped cress

1. Cook onion in a generous slug of olive oil with a pinch of salt over a very low heat, covered, stirring occasionally. Cook until they are totally soft but not at all coloured. This will take around 15 minutes.
2. Meanwhile prepare Jerusalem artichokes and when onions are ready add them to the saucepan along with another good pinch of salt, the bouquet garni and *just* enough water to *barely* cover vegetables. Jerusalem artichokes are not starchy so you need less water than for, say, a soup containing potatoes. Bring to a boil then simmer until Jerusalem artichokes are totally tender.
3. Meanwhile prepare garnishes. Season prawns with a little salt, pepper, nutmeg and *piment d'Espelette*, then fry them briefly on both sides in a dash of well-heated oil. If preparing these in advance you'll need to re-warm before serving. Also, mix around two tablespoons of fresh olive oil with around two teaspoons of *piment* in a little cup.
4. To finish the soup, remove herbs, blend until smooth, adjust consistency by adding water if needed, and season with salt and nutmeg as desired.
5. Garnish each bowl of soup with two or three prawns, a drizzle of your *piment d'Espelette* oil and a sprinkling of chives and cress.

Simple alternative: Jerusalem artichoke and celery soup

1 small onion, finely sliced
olive oil
salt
500g Jerusalem artichokes, peeled and evenly sliced
bouquet garni of one small sprig of thyme, a parsley stalk and a bay leaf
1 large stick celery, finely sliced

Make the soup as above, adding the celery once the water has just come to a boil. Check that both the Jerusalem artichoke and celery pieces are tender before blending. To keep the bright, grassy celery note, try not to overcook the soup. Many people add cream or butter to Jerusalem artichoke soup but I don't think it's necessary as it's surprisingly creamy as it is. (Not that I'm usually so restrained.) This soup is delicious on its own or with a drizzle of white truffle oil and sprinkling of freshly cracked black pepper.

Jerusalem artichoke notes

Jerusalem artichokes are neither artichokes nor from Jerusalem. It seems their name is a corruption of '*girasole*', Italian for sunflower, as the plant is indeed a relative, complete with bright yellow flowers and head-turning properties. They originated in North America and first arrived in the UK in 1617, via France. Their flavour is distinctly artichokey, which probably explains the first half of their name. In the United States now they're called '*sunchokes*', which, as much as I hate invented conjoined abbreviations, is probably a more sensible name.

In fact they're members of the **lettuce family**, along with salsify, and only distant cousins of the artichoke. I find them utterly **delicious** – roasted or fried so caramelised on the inside and soft in the centre, baked in a creamy gratin, puréed smooth, or raw in a salad. And they're incredibly easy to grow – prolific, disease and frost resistant, and harvestable for several months. You'd think we'd all be eating Jerusalem artichokes all winter long. But we're not because, a) their knobbly shape makes them a nightmare to peel, and b) they cause not inconsiderable flatulence...

I'd never really believed **the wind thing**. That is, until I started testing recipes in earnest to produce this missive... So now I'd agree with Guy Watson of Riverford Farm in Devon when he says their "*effect is **more thunderous than malodorous***". John Goodyer, the first to plant Jerusalem artichokes in England, didn't like eating them himself: "*which way so ever they be dressed and eaten, they stir and cause a filthy loathsome stinking wind, thereby causing the belly to be pained and tormented.*" They're not that bad, honestly. Goodyer must have eaten a tonne of them.

To reduce their effects, it is said that you should cook them with **bay leaves**, or eat them with **fennel**. All I can say to that is that the one bay leaf in this recipe doesn't seem to be enough. As with most farty food, we should actually be grateful. For the little '**friendly bacteria**' in our guts are producing the carbon dioxide and other gases by doing us a favour: they're digesting the fructose chains in Jerusalem artichokes that we can't.

Try to choose smooth specimens, to avoid wastage when peeling. However peeling is not always strictly necessary, provided you can scrub them clean enough. Leaving the skin on will help them keep their shape during roasting or frying. Note that peeled and cut Jerusalem artichoke will **discolour in the air**, so if preparing them in advance, even by a few minutes, keep in water acidulated with a dash of lemon juice or white wine vinegar, as you would trimmed artichokes.

Apparently, if you cook Jerusalem artichokes at a very low temperature for a very, very long time the flesh **candies itself**, turning into a sweet translucent brown jelly, like aspic. This is definitely something I need to try...

Sources:

'Jane Grigson's Vegetable Book', J Grigson, 1978

'Riverford Farm Cook Book', G Watson & J Baxter, 2008

'On Food and Cooking', H McGee, 2004

'Food Plants of the World', B van Wyk, 2005

